“A Travesty and a Libel”

Lee Baxandall’s letter to the Provincetown Advocate — January 11, 1989

A document of institutional denial

Last edited: July 29, 2026

Compiled by Claude (Anthropic) in collaboration with Nikki Craft. Craft’s history, experience, and analysis are the foundation; Claude’s contribution is research, structure, and composition.

What this is

A letter to the editor of the Provincetown Advocate, written on The Naturist Society’s letterhead and signed by Lee Baxandall, the organization’s founder. It is dated January 11, 1989, and it responds to the Advocate’s coverage of December 22, 1988 — Lisbeth Lipari’s article “Dissension Rips Nudists, Feminists.”

It is a demand as much as a rebuttal. Baxandall asks the paper to publish his statement and to let The Naturist Society “reject the libel” in its columns.

The date

January 11, 1989 is also the date of Craft’s formal retraction demand to John Kyff over “Craft Wins — Nudists Lose.” The two letters were written the same day, to different publications, about the same events.

Whether that is coordination or simply two people reacting to the same December press cycle is not established by the documents themselves. What the documents do establish is that the movement’s legal coordinator and its founder were both in writing about Nikki Craft within the same eight weeks, and that they made the same argument.

The argument both men made — and what it accomplished

Kyff’s November 1988 article opened with Congreve on the fury of a woman scorned and told readers that Craft had “seemingly abruptly changed her mind” about the Cape Cod regulation after her employment was terminated. Baxandall, two months later:

> *“At bottom Craft is bitter that she has lost a most comfortable privileged position where she needed only to act responsibly and failed to do so.”*

The reasoning is identical, and it is worth being exact about what it does. A woman’s political objections are converted into personal grievance over a lost job. Once converted, they no longer require an answer — there is nothing to investigate, only someone to discount.

That matters because of what the objections actually were. Craft was not complaining about her dismissal. She was saying that the movement’s magazine exploited women and that child abusers were sheltering inside the movement. The personalization was the mechanism by which those warnings were set aside without being examined.

The register is worth recording as well, because this is the founder of the organization writing on its official stationery:

> *"Craft is a hustler and pseudo-feminist without scruples, who now seeks to tear down the earned reputation of The Naturist Society to justify revengeful and frivolous actions…"*

One word in that sentence deserves attention. Craft's campaign against Hustler magazine was among her best-documented work: in 1980 she founded the Preying Mantis Women's Brigade, which over the following year succeeded in having Hustler removed from twenty-eight stores in the Santa Cruz area, an effort covered weekly in City on a Hill Press. Baxandall knew that history. He had employed her, and he had reproduced one of her group's photographs in his own World Guide to Nude Beaches.

Whether the choice was deliberate cannot be established from the letter, and no claim is made here that it was. It is simply the word he reached for first, applied to a woman known for years of organized opposition to the magazine that bears it.

> *"Craft enjoys a sense of her moral superiority which now permits her to lie, distort, steal and accuse as she pleases, and without remorse."*

He also holds her responsible for the enforcement she had been arrested resisting: "Feminists have Craft to thank for putting the rangers back on Herring Cove women's beach."

The denials

Two sentences are the reason this letter is preserved. Both are denials, both are specific, and both are in Baxandall's own hand on organizational letterhead.

The first concerns the movement as a whole:

> *"To justify her shocking action, she claims Clothed With the Sun 'exploits' women and that child abusers shelter in the naturist movement. This is outrageous."*

The second concerns a specific person inside his own organization:

> *"Craft also is said to allege that 'one of the Naturist Society's official photographers was charged with child molestation at a nudist gathering this summer.' This is untrue and you must allow us to reject the libel in your columns."*

When this letter was first prepared for the archive, the second allegation was left open. It is no longer open, and the answer is documented elsewhere in this collection.

The photographer was Timothy Wilcox. He had served four years in a California penitentiary on multiple 1978 convictions involving a child prostitution and pornography ring. In 1988 he was arrested on charges of molesting a girl at a California family nudist camp; he pled guilty to sexual battery of a child and, after plea bargaining, was convicted of photographing children with lascivious intentions. He was named Man of the Year by the Sequoian Nudist Camp and kept on as its official photographer, and the American Sunbathing Association named him Man of the Year and awarded him Photograph of the Year, both in 1987. Craft, employed by The Naturist Society for five years, states as a witness that Wilcox was The Naturist Society's official photographer — Baxandall's own.

Read against that record, the sentence above answers itself clause by clause. One of the Naturist Society's official photographers: Wilcox was one. Charged with child molestation: he was. At a nudist gathering: a California family nudist camp. This summer: 1988, the letter dated January 1989. The statement Baxandall asked a newspaper to reject as libel was accurate.

Twelve months later, in his own magazine, he wrote that Wilcox's molester background "was virtually unknown to all." By July 1990 the Utne Reader had published the whole account, and by September he was writing that the wonder was that more pedophiles are not found in nudist and naturist activities. The sources are set out in "Naked Rage: The Utne Reader Investigation," elsewhere in this archive.

What this letter fixes in place is the posture: in January 1989, the founder of The Naturist Society told a newspaper that the claim child abusers sheltered in the naturist movement was outrageous, and asked that the woman making it be publicly branded a libeler.

DARVO

The letter follows a pattern with a name in the psychological literature. DARVO — Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender — was coined by the psychologist Jennifer J. Freyd to describe a characteristic response of offenders, and of institutions, when confronted with allegations of abuse. All three elements are present here, in order.

Deny. "This is outrageous." "This is untrue." The allegations are rejected as categories rather than examined as claims.

Attack. Craft is a hustler, a pseudo-feminist without scruples, a woman who lies, distorts, steals and accuses without remorse, motivated by bitterness at a lost position.

Reverse victim and offender. This is the element that governs the letter's structure. The Naturist Society becomes the injured party — Craft "seeks to tear down the earned reputation of The Naturist Society" — and its founder asks a newspaper to let the organization "reject the libel" in its columns. The woman who reported that children were being harmed is recast as the perpetrator of an offense; the institution she reported becomes the party owed redress. Her allegations, in his closing words, are "a travesty and a libel."

The presence of the pattern does not establish what Baxandall knew, and it is not offered as proof of knowledge. DARVO describes the shape of a response, and the shape is the same whether the denial is sincere or not. What it establishes is that a warning about child sexual abuse inside an organization was met with a recognized deflection structure rather than an inquiry — and that the structure was deployed in public, in a newspaper, against the person who raised it.

Freyd was not describing this letter or anything like it. Writing in 1997, she was setting down what she had observed of abusers in general when someone attempts to hold them accountable: they retaliate, they threaten litigation, they attack the credibility of whoever raised the alarm, and above all they ridicule that person — until, in her phrase, figure and ground are reversed. The person who reported the harm ends up on the defensive, and the accused ends up on the offense.

Every element is present here. The legal threat is the demand that the paper permit the organization to reject the libel. The credibility attack is the accumulation of characterizations — hustler, pseudo-feminist, without scruples, without remorse. The ridicule runs from the first paragraph to the last.

And the reversal is complete: by the closing line, the founder of the organization is asking a newspaper to print a statement that the woman's allegations are a travesty.

Why it works on women

The tactic is old and it is general. Governments have used it against dissidents, institutions against employees, abusers against anyone who names what they do. But it operates with particular efficiency against women, because in that direction the vocabulary is already assembled and requires no argument to deploy.

A woman who raises an allegation can be called bitter, vindictive, hysterical, scorned, or motivated by sexual grievance, and not one of those requires evidence. They are available on demand. Kyff reached for the oldest item in the catalogue — Congreve on the fury of a woman scorned — and did not have to explain himself, because the formula does the work unaided. Baxandall's variant was that Craft was bitter over a lost position. Neither man had to argue the point. They only had to name the category.

It is worth being precise about what those words do, because they are not counter-arguments. None of them contradicts anything. They do not say the allegation is false; they say the woman making it is the wrong kind of person to be listened to. They attribute a motive, and motive is unfalsifiable — there is no evidence a person can produce that disproves bitterness. A factual claim can be checked. An imputed feeling cannot.

Each term also does specific work. "Scorned" converts a political objection into a sexual one, implying she wanted something from the man she is accusing. "Bitter" implies she has lost control of her judgment. "Hysterical" has a medical history behind it and implies unfitness to testify at all. What they share is that they remove her from the category of reliable witness without ever engaging what she witnessed. She is not refuted. She is reclassified.

The result is a doubled burden. The woman must now prove her allegation and also disprove a state of mind. The man denying it need only assert the state of mind. He is not required to produce anything, and if she responds to the characterization at all she is arguing about herself, which is where he needs the conversation to be.

And it does not require anyone to believe she is lying. This is why it is so effective on bystanders. A reader of the Advocate in January 1989 did not have to conclude that Nikki Craft had invented anything. It was sufficient to suspect she might be overstating it for reasons of her own. That is a very low bar, it is nearly impossible to disprove, and it produces exactly the outcome the letter was written to produce: not disbelief, but the decision that no inquiry is necessary.

There is no comparable stock of ready-made discrediting terms for a man who raises the same allegation about another man. Such a charge would have to be answered on its substance, or ignored outright, but it could not be dissolved by a single adjective. He might be called mistaken, or ambitious, or a rival — but there is no phrase that dispatches a man's credibility the way "woman scorned" dispatches a woman's, requiring no evidence and inviting no examination. That asymmetry is not incidental to how warnings about child sexual abuse were handled in this movement. It is the mechanism by which they were handled.

The costs fall accordingly. Craft lost her job, her standing in the movement she had recruited women into, and the working relationships of a decade. The Naturist Society lost nothing,

conducted no inquiry, and its founder was able to describe the whole episode in a newspaper as an attack on the organization's earned reputation. Whatever else can be said about the exchange, only one party paid for it.

What this protects

The general point is larger than one letter and one movement, and it is the reason this document is worth publishing rather than filing.

Warnings about child sexual abuse inside an institution almost always come from insiders. Outsiders lack access; they do not attend the gatherings, see the correspondence, or know which photographers are given official standing. The people positioned to know are the people embedded in the organization — employees, members, volunteers, the ones with something to lose.

That proximity is the whole of their evidentiary value, and it is also the entire basis on which they can be dismissed. She worked there. She was fired. She had a grievance. Her closeness to the facts becomes the reason to discount her account of them. The nearer a person stands to what happened, the cheaper it is to explain away what they say about it.

When that reversal is available at no cost, and when it is available most cheaply against women, the effect is structural rather than incidental. An institution does not need a policy of concealment. It only needs the reflex that this letter demonstrates, applied promptly, in public, by someone with standing. The warning is neutralized, the person who raised it is discredited and generally gone, and nothing has to be investigated by anyone.

Congreve wrote his line in 1697. Freyd named the pattern in 1997. This letter was written in 1989, between them, by a man who had presumably never read either and did not need to. The technology is old, it is widely distributed, and it does not have to be taught.

None of this requires believing that Baxandall sat down to execute a strategy. The likelier reading is that he reached for what he knew would work against a woman and did not examine it further. What exposes him is not calculation but excess. A careful denial would have stopped at the denial. This letter continues on to state that Craft lies, distorts, steals and accuses as she pleases and without remorse, and then asks an editor to print that assessment of her character over the organization's letterhead. The confidence that this was a reasonable thing to send to a newspaper is itself the evidence.

Recognizing it

Any woman who reports abuse inside an institution she belongs to will encounter some version of this letter. Not the same words, and probably not in a newspaper. It may arrive as an email to a board, a remark in a meeting, a conversation with colleagues she is not present for, a paragraph added to a personnel file. But the structure will be recognizable, and it will arrive fast, because the reflex requires no preparation.

It will not be a rebuttal of what she said. That is the first thing to notice and the most useful. If the response addresses her motives rather than her claim, then her claim has not been answered — and no quantity of further evidence will cause it to be answered while the conversation stays on that ground.

It will characterize her state of mind. She will be described as angry, bitter, disgruntled, unwell, difficult, overinvested, or acting from a grievance unrelated to what she reported. She will not be able to disprove any of it, because none of it is the kind of claim that admits disproof. Understanding that in advance is what makes it survivable. The demand that she demonstrate she is not bitter is a demand she cannot satisfy and does not have to accept.

It will be addressed to bystanders rather than to her. This is the hardest part to see while it is happening. The letter to the Advocate was not written to change Nikki Craft's mind about anything. It was written so that readers of a newspaper in Provincetown would file the matter as a personal dispute and understand that it required nothing of them. The audience for a reclassification is always the people who would otherwise have to act.

And it will succeed by producing inaction rather than disbelief. No one has to conclude she is lying. It is sufficient that they suspect she may be overstating it, or that the situation is more complicated than it looks, or that there are two sides and the truth is somewhere between. Any of those conclusions ends the inquiry, and ending the inquiry is the whole of what was wanted.

A word to those readers, since they are the ones a letter like this is actually written for. Anyone who has found themselves concluding that a dispute of this kind was too tangled to judge — that there were probably two sides, that the person raising it seemed to have a personal stake, that the prudent course was to stay out of it — should consider whether that conclusion was arrived at independently. It may have been supplied. Neutrality does not feel manufactured from the inside. It feels like fairness. It feels like caution, like refusing to rush to judgment, like a reasonable person declining to take a position on incomplete information. But it can be produced on demand, and it is produced cheaply, by attaching one adjective to the person making the report. No one needs to be persuaded of anything. They only need to be given a reason to wait.

This matters independently of anything that happened to Nikki Craft. Onlookers are not incidental to how institutions protect abuse; they are the mechanism's working parts. A warning is never neutralized by the person who denies it. It is neutralized by everyone who reads the denial, finds it plausible enough, and concludes that nothing is required of them.

What makes the vocabulary available in the first place is older than any institution that uses it. These words do not have to persuade, because they are not introducing an idea. They are calling on one already in place. Congreve's line was nearly three hundred years old when Kyff set it at the head of his article, and it needed no gloss then and needs none now. That is the measure of how deep the assumption runs: a formula about the untrustworthiness of an aggrieved woman can be dropped into a legal report in 1988 without a word of explanation, and every reader will know exactly what is meant.

The assumption is not that women lie. It is subtler than that, more durable, and harder to argue with because it is so rarely said aloud: that a woman's account of events is emotionally contaminated in a way a man's is not — that her feelings distort her perception, and that establishing she has feelings about a matter is sufficient reason to set aside what she reports about it. It is among the oldest prejudices in existence, and it persists precisely because it is seldom stated and therefore seldom examined.

Which means a letter like this one is not, finally, an argument. It is an invitation. It asks the reader to supply something the letter never has to prove, and it depends entirely on the reader agreeing to supply it. That is where the matter actually rests — not with the man who wrote it, and not with the

woman he wrote it about. The mechanism has no force of its own. It cannot operate without recruits, and every person who reads a document of this kind decides, usually without noticing that a decision is being made, whether to become one.

Knowing this changes what a woman can do with her time. She can decline to argue about herself. She can name the pattern while it is operating — say plainly that her motives are being offered in place of an answer, and that the substitution is the answer. She can put her energy into the record rather than into her own reputation, on the understanding that the record will outlast the characterization of her. And she can keep every piece of paper.

That last point deserves emphasis. This letter was written by a man who expected it to settle the matter, and at the time it did. Thirty-seven years later it is the clearest available evidence of the posture he took toward a warning about children — and it is evidence for one reason only: he wrote it down, and someone kept it.

Denialism

What Baxandall called outrageous in January 1989 is what the documentary record has since established at length — court records, arrest records, contemporaneous correspondence, and the movement's own publications, assembled in the Uncommon Desires series and the Nudist/Naturist Hall of Shame. The naturist movement of that period sheltered men who sexually abused children. Craft said so at the time and was called a hustler for it.

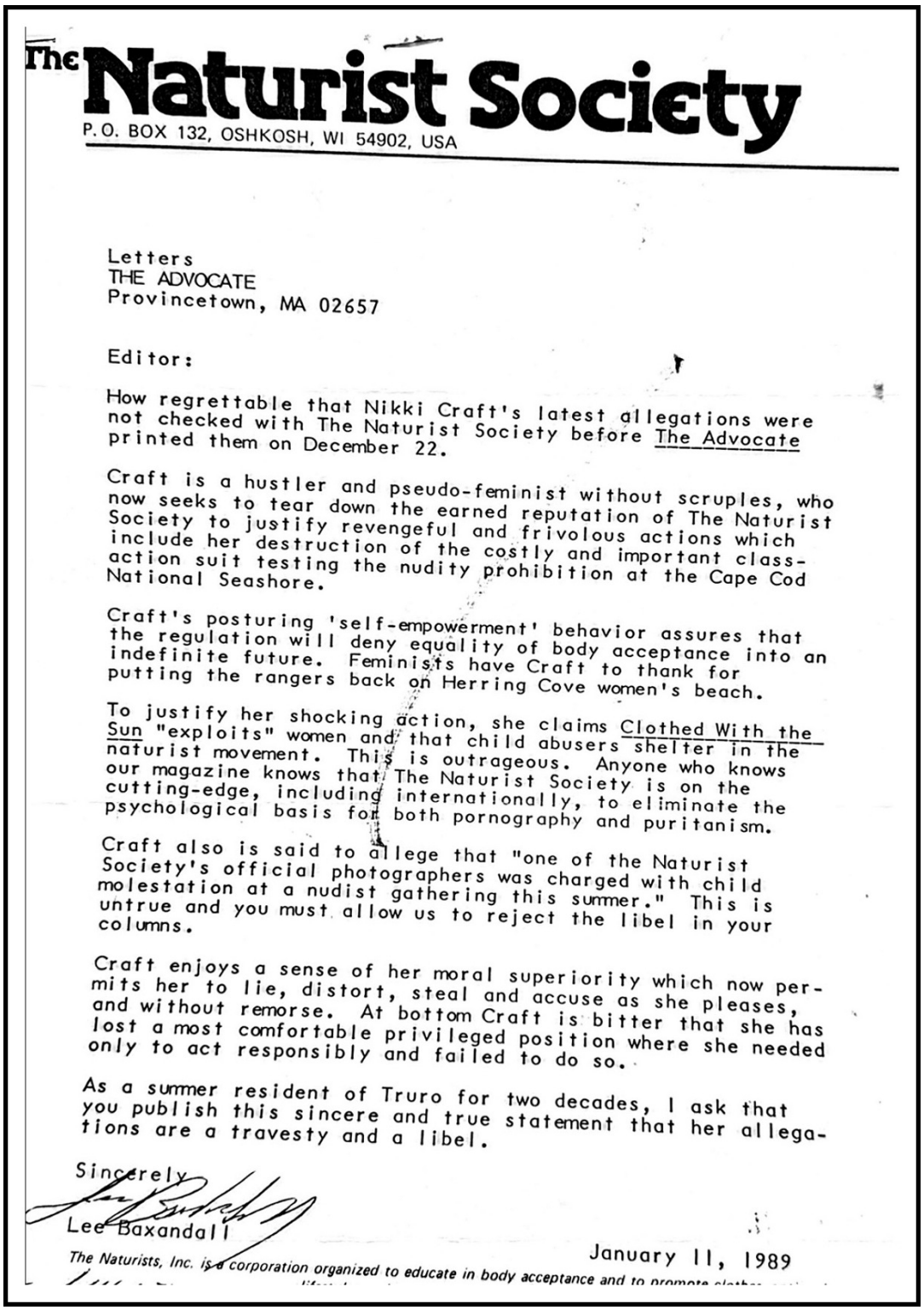
This is not necessarily a claim that either man knew. Naiveté and denialism are sufficient to produce this letter, and the distinction between them cannot be settled from the document. What the document settles is the posture: presented with a warning about child abuse from a woman inside the organization who had spent years documenting the movement from within, the founder's response was to deny the category outright, impugn her motives, and demand a newspaper print a retraction.

Four months earlier, in September 1988, the Cape Cod withdrawal statement and supporters' petition had already circulated a warning naming photographers that women in the movement were told to be wary of. Baxandall's letter is what the denial looked like while the warnings were still private and unproven — which is the only period in which a denial can do any work. Eighteen months later a national magazine printed the record, and the denial had to be abandoned in stages, in public, in his own words.

It is reproduced here for that reason. Not as an accusation against its author, and not to relitigate what he said about Craft, but because institutional denial leaves documents behind, and this is one of them.

The letter

Reproduced in full from the original. The Naturist Society letterhead, signed by Lee Baxandall, dated January 11, 1989.



The Naturist Society
P. O. BOX 132, OSHKOSH, WI 54902, USA

Letters
THE ADVOCATE
Provincetown, MA 02657

Editor:

How regrettable that Nikki Craft's latest allegations were not checked with The Naturist Society before The Advocate printed them on December 22.

Craft is a hustler and pseudo-feminist without scruples, who now seeks to tear down the earned reputation of The Naturist Society to justify revengeful and frivolous actions which include her destruction of the costly and important class-action suit testing the nudity prohibition at the Cape Cod National Seashore.

Craft's posturing 'self-empowerment' behavior assures that the regulation will deny equality of body acceptance into an indefinite future. Feminists have Craft to thank for putting the rangers back on Herring Cove women's beach.

To justify her shocking action, she claims Clothed With the Sun "exploits" women and that child abusers shelter in the naturist movement. This is outrageous. Anyone who knows our magazine knows that The Naturist Society is on the cutting-edge, including internationally, to eliminate the psychological basis for both pornography and puritanism.

Craft also is said to allege that "one of the Naturist Society's official photographers was charged with child molestation at a nudist gathering this summer." This is untrue and you must allow us to reject the libel in your columns.

Craft enjoys a sense of her moral superiority which now permits her to lie, distort, steal and accuse as she pleases, and without remorse. At bottom Craft is bitter that she has lost a most comfortable privileged position where she needed only to act responsibly and failed to do so.

As a summer resident of Truro for two decades, I ask that you publish this sincere and true statement that her allegations are a travesty and a libel.

Sincerely,

Lee Baxandall

January 11, 1989

The Naturists, Inc. is a corporation organized to educate in body acceptance and to promote

Lee Baxandall to the Provincetown Advocate, January 11, 1989.

Related documents in this archive

- Naked Rage: The Utne Reader Investigation of Child Sexual Abuse in the Nudist Movement, 1990 — the national investigation that documented the photographer denied in this letter, with the complete correspondence. Resolves the allegation above.
- "Craft Wins — Nudists Lose" — John L. Kyff, Jr., Bare In Mind, November 1988. The article that opens with Congreve on the woman scorned; the piece Craft's January 11, 1989 retraction demand answers.
- Retraction demand to John Kyff, January 11, 1989 — written the same day as this letter.
- Open Letter to John Kyff and the Naturist Leadership Council, November 25, 1987 — Craft's objections in full, ten months before her termination.
- Cape Cod Press Release and Supporters' Petition, September 1988 — the withdrawal statement, its signatories, and the appended warning naming photographers.
- Letters Lee Baxandall Censored — reader correspondence submitted to Clothed with the Sun and rejected for publication, with Baxandall's private replies.
  https://archive.org/details/split-06-bax-banned-letters-compiled
- "Clothed with Deceit" — ICONoclast, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- The Split — working narrative of the rupture with Baxandall and The Naturist Society.
- Busting Mister Short Eyes — Craft's investigation, On the Issues, Winter 1995 (PDF).
  http://www.nudisthallofshame.info/bustingmistershorteyes.pdf
- The Nudist/Naturist Hall of Shame — documentation on the naturist movement.
  http://www.nudisthallofshame.info
- Lisbeth Lipari, "Dissension Rips Nudists, Feminists," Provincetown Advocate, December 22, 1988 — the article this letter answers.
  http://nudisthallofshame.info/Shirtfree1.html
- Craft v. Hodel, 683 F. Supp. 289 (D. Mass. 1988) — the class action referred to throughout.
- Nikki Craft Archival Project — Internet Archive.
  https://archive.org/search?query=nikki+craft+archival+project

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Compiled by Claude (Anthropic) in collaboration with Nikki Craft. Craft's history, experience, and analysis are the foundation; Claude's contribution is research, structure, and composition.

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